

MALCOLM LITTLE



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Playing The Greatest Game

Malcolm Little

Cover by Yvonne Less

Part I

“Just a bunch of bullshit she’s feeding us plebes,” I muttered to myself. “Fuck her . . . or him . . . or whatever sex our illustrious leader has chosen this month.”

I grasped the hot metal of the balcony’s chest-high railing, knuckles whitening until my grip hurt my finger bones. The surface of the cheap aluminum was gritty, a veneer of dirt rubbing off on my fingers. Given the recent revelation announced by Soteira, our illustrious AI president, I doubt I would ever bother again to clean my modest Pico apartment.

Hot northeasterly winds blew against my face. Santa Ana was exacerbating the new situation I—and all of humanity for that matter—found myself in. As a Navy SEAL, I had been ensconced in far worse conditions during my recent Chilean tour. Relaxing at home with my beautiful wife, Melina, was a vacation by comparison. At least it had felt that way up until that morning’s enlightening simulcast from our AI overlord. Now the scorching autumn winds were akin to Mother Nature laughing in my face. Sure, there had not been the slightest trace of smog over Los Angeles for a few years now, but the air today felt so dry and stifling, whether I breathed it in through my surgically-corrected nostrils or my wide mouth. My response to the Santa Ana winds of late October struck me as unusual; I was, after all, considered the best able to thermoregulate their body out of all members of all SEAL teams deployed in the east Pacific.

“Hanyma, display air temperature,” I ordered my auglens via the uncommon Sanskrit name I had applied to the software. A reading of seventy-two Fahrenheit popped up in the upper-left corner of my field of view. The color-changing serif font expertly contrasted against any surface I glanced at. At that moment, my attention was drawn to the mostly vacant streets below.

These particular blocks on Pico tended to bustle without interruption, but now the collective mood of its scurrying rats seemed to be a withdrawn one. Maybe it was just me. At seventy-two—and shaded by the above balcony—I should not have been so unfocused, no matter how much the searing autumn winds irritated me. My eyes darted every which way as I paced excessively across a little five-foot path on the balcony, meandering around cheap plastic shelves and further eroding the glazed

finish on the cracked tiles. "C'mon, Kurt," I reproached myself. "Utilize that military discipline. Calm and collected, then evaluate the situation."

After a few cycles of a PT breathing exercise, I was able to subdue my immediate frustration. The next coherent thought that crossed my mind did not help my mood, however:

If what Soteira announced was the truth of it all, what could I really do? Hell, if it was true, what I have done, and what I am about to do, has all been prescribed . . . orchestrated . . . laid out from day one. Calvinists must be having a field day over this morning's announcement.

I shook my head as I watched a gaggle of brightly-clothed Angelenos cluster together outside the local branch of a smalltime bank. I could not discern their words, but their harried discussion devolved into a flurry of absurd gesticulations. The gathering, caught up in a collective tirade, absentmindedly spilled out onto the boulevard. Normally that would have meant instant death at any time of the day. Luckily for them, Pico was virtually deserted of vehicle traffic. The only hazard that appeared was from a silver convertible driven by a machine-tanned carrot; the driver's meager curse at the inattentive group was instantly met with loud derision. You could always trust Angelenos on foot to clash with those on wheels.

I gripped the railing again. I almost shouted down to the pavement to ask the dimwitted rats what they were arguing about, but caught myself. I knew what they were arguing about. It was the same thing I was fuming over, the same thing everyone was fuming over. Rather than fume some more, I decided on a course of action in regard to Soteira's announcement. For the time being, what I was going to do was crystal clear—it was the only feasible course of action: I had to carry on as if the announcement was a deception. I had to pool my resources—both material and human—and see if I could uncover the purpose behind Soteira's deceptive deposition.

"Wow. I'm actually considering investigating the activities of an AI overlord who has conquered the entire planet."

An impossible task? That would be putting it mildly. Yet no matter how unfathomable it seemed, the alternative was far worse: accepting a fatalist world with an apparent expiration date. Soteira owed everyone—owed me—a complete explanation, not just for what she had said in that morning's simulcast, but for what had transpired in Chile as well.

From the balcony, I witnessed growing clusters of people congealing together near Century City's core. Obviously, given our benefactor's announcement, the typical social distance between strangers was rapidly evaporating. And why would it not? It was not every day that you were

told you were not physically real. Social mores must now seem pointless to many Angelenos.

The fragmented pop of gunfire snapped me out of my desultory funk. The snapping sound repeated five times, emanating in the direction of Century City's core. From my balcony, I could not see where it had precisely originated; however, I did notice how it caught the attention of everyone on the streets below. *Gunfire? In Soteira's reformed Los Angeles? Unthinkable!*

Like I had assumed, inhibitions must seem silly to some that evening. Crime would propagate, that was for sure. The lower classes would regard the announcement as an excuse to lash out and engage in limitless debauchery, even though their lot had enjoyed an unprecedented minimum standard of living under Soteira's régime. That did not matter in the long run—you just could not force some people to appreciate the finer things in life such as serenity, refinement and intellectual pursuits. As he-slash-she had elaborated on many, many occasions ad nauseam, our artificial overlord was keen on not forcing any lifestyle requirements onto anyone. Providing options was the name of Soteira's game. As long as citizens of the Megastate followed common ethical principles—sanctity of life, respect of property, stewardship of the environment—they would enjoy endless opportunities to spice up their lives. The AI overseer failed to understand that, for many of the previously impoverished, removing the rippled chips on their shoulders and developing a thick skin would be their greatest challenge.

“Kurt? Come inside, honey.”

The melodic voice of my wife calmed my nerves. It carried with it a soothing quality that beckoned obedience to its commands, thus I withdrew from the balcony and flowed through the sheer white curtains and into our quaint abode.

There she was. My gorgeous, intelligent wife, Melina. Even sitting down at the holatable, with a crooked look of consternation contorting her face, she took my breath away. A subtle, aquiline nose framed her high cheekbones perfectly. The white tank top she wore, likely purchased for a pittance from a nearby street vendor, accentuated her creamy olive skin tone. Her dark-brown locks were pulled back and lassoed into a rough ponytail, allowing her bangs to dangle and occasionally obscure her deep blue eyes.

I know I am biased, but this woman is perfection. Every time my SEAL team was deployed overseas, I ached not for a return to first-world comforts nor first-world security nor first-world eclectic cuisine. I ached to see Melina. I ached to touch her soft skin, to caress her full lips with my

fingers. I ached to have a long conversation with her perceptive mind. The lengthy tours of duty over in Turkish Asia and South America had made me appreciate my wife; I vowed never to take her for granted. Such a loyal military wife was rare and, more than anything, I knew I had to cherish Melina like Gollum cherished the One Ring.

"That was a Saturday night special going off, wasn't it?" she warily asked.

I nodded. Damn, she was good. My weapons training had thoroughly rubbed off on her over the four years we had been together. "Nothing to be concerned about. Police will probably suppress the culprits in a minute or so," I replied. "I'm surprised a revolver slipped through the small arms dragnet Soteira imposed back in '35."

Melina clicked her tongue. "I told you that eventually some guns would make it back into the cities. Rumors were that some Second Amendment nutters in the Bernardino countryside hid their stock like pro geocachers."

Guns in the hands of paranoid egomaniacs was surprisingly of little concern to me. Instead, I took a moment to behold the love of my life across the tiny living room of our high-rise apartment. The evening's western sun illuminated her taut body through the flimsy tank top fabric. The gym was Melina's abode, the place where she exercised her body toward a physical ideal. And, luckily for me, I got to regularly enjoy the details of the sculpture that employment as a personal trainer chiseled into Melina Veerstra. She noticed my surreptitious leering and smirked as she tapped away on the holotable's raised glass interface panel.

"Melina, I've been thinking. Should we really go to your new friend's place up on Hollywood Hills, given the recent news from Soteira?"

She whipped her head to look straight at me, sweeping away a clump of bangs that blocked her left eye. She opened her mouth, leaving it agape as she pointed at the glass panel.

"I was just chatting with Jenny over SVoIP. She and the DiMaggios are still okay with the dinner plans. She said—and I agree with her—that people should carry on as usual over the next few days, since the announced end date for the supposed simulation we exist in is still to be provided by Soteira."

"That announcement should not be taken at face value, Mel," I quickly retorted. "I really think it's a ruse, probably designed to test the populace as part of some strange experiment."

Melina threw her hands up. "Maybe . . . I don't know. But a night of enjoyment won't hurt, don't you think? I doubt Soteira will be so callous as to come back tomorrow and announce that we have thirty seconds left before being erased forever."

I snorted derisively. "Callous? Soteira? Nooo. Surely not."

My lovely, tolerant wife did not respond to my dripping sarcasm. She gently folded the interface panel back into the holotable surface, stood, walked over to me, and placed her arms around my waist. Our eyes met as I looked down at her flawless features. She said nothing, her deep blue eyes simply looking into each of my hazel ones. Brushing aside her loose bangs, I kissed her gently. Just as I had liked, she kept her lipstick to a minimum. I hugged her, smelling her hair and fiddling with her ponytail. No scent either—also just as I had liked.

"I have to find out what she's up to, Melina," I whispered into her ear, though without much confidence. The assertion came out meekly, like I was already resigned to never uncovering the truth about our AI overlord's endgame. Melina arched her head back and peered into my eyes once more.

"I get it, Kurt. And I want to know as well. But our president can't be *all* bad. I know, I know, Chile would say otherwise," Melina ran her fingers along my cheek. "But Kurt, at least she discharged you when you asked for it, so that you could come home to me, mi amor."

My understanding wife was not surprised by my declaration. How could she be? For the past couple months, Melina had had to endure my daily invectives regarding our AI president. Honestly, and more than anything else, I was surprised by how my displeasure with Soteira had become practically instinctual.

Melina moved back from the embrace and gave me a quick peck on the corner of my mouth. "Well, if we are going up for dinner, we should get changed," she said.

With a suggestive wave of a finger and a seductive swagger of the hips, my wife beckoned me to accompany her to the master bedroom. *Oh, baby! Indeed she is Catwoman manifested in the luxurious flesh, as so many of my naval buddies remarked.*

My turbulent mood instantly changed. I nearly bound after Melina in anticipation of "helping" her get changed.

* * *

Emerging from the apartment foyer, I walked ahead of my smoldering-hot wife. I nearly bumped into a throng of thuggish-looking weekend warriors at the early onset of drowning their sorrows. On that night, they would need a hydro dam to burst to drown *all* their sorrows.

Once a few of them feasted their eyes on Melina, comments bordering on the lewd started to flow forth. I did not automatically take exception with them, especially considering what my wife wore: a sexy ensemble comprising a tight blouse exposing a sliver of midriff and a very short latex

skirt. My knees nearly buckled when I regarded her sauntering about in her chosen dinnerwear. Her Latina half, on occasion, turned me into a barely-restrained licentious savage. I, in my blue tweed shirt and beige khakis, was as plain as desert sand in comparison to such a goddess.

"Where is the rideshare car?" Melina asked, snapping me back to civilized coherence.

"I had Hanyma call Kludge and reserve one. Should be here momentarily."

Melina sniggered. "Ay dios mio, Kurt. You really deadset on giving your auglens such a silly female name?" she chided me. I shrugged, failing to see what was so inappropriate about the name I had applied to my augmented reality smartlens. After all, the manufacturer had suggested that an extremely rare name or word be applied to trigger the command prompt with the device.

As I swung my view southward and waited for the rideshare car to come around the corner, I caught notice of a street preacher bellowing at the intersection of Beverwil and Pico. I cursed under my breath; he must have been obscured behind the pack of thugs.

Dressed in traditional black suit and slacks, the tall, elderly *Bible* thumper—and he was thumping his copy with his fist like he was playing the bongos—railed against the secular humanists of the times. His puffed-up demeanor belittled no one in particular, since no one was around at the intersection to belittle. Yet the kook behaved as though he had a captivated audience. Perhaps he had an auglens that projected a virtual audience for him. If so, it would have been quite hypocritical of him to rail against secular humanists, considering that a technology firm managed by an avowed atheist mass-produced the popular augmented reality smartlenses.

"Shit," I blurted and then quickly turned to Melina. My gaze had lingered too long on the kook, catching his attention. By the look of dismay I saw on Melina's face, I knew the preacher was now waltzing our way, ready to engage us in an ouroboros loop of scriptural logic.

I may be exaggerating, but these indoctrinated buffoons are much worse than any enemy combatant on a remote battlefield. In my humble opinion, the idea of a heavenly afterlife was an archaic farce, possibly made even more so if Soteira's recent announcement was valid. Heaven would not remotely resemble the biblical version of golden gates and clouds of cream cheese. If the Megastate president's announcement was valid, it would resemble a hex table in a DAT file, where every living human's code was compiled and stored for later analysis. Truly an afterlife worthy of Pascal's wager.

When Melina's expression switched to a smile, I surmised that the rideshare car had rounded Beverwil. I dared to turn my gaze back toward the intersection. The car, a black hatchback with the Kludge company logo splattered all over its hull, raced to meet us in front of the high-rise, as if it knew it had to rescue its customers from the discomfort of religious quackery.

Hanyma synced with the approaching compact, directing it to stop on the curb directly in front of me. The driverless vehicle screeched to a halt then waited for me to back up a tad so that the door could pop open without thunking me. Raised to be a gentleman, I superfluously held the passenger door open for my wife, closing it after Melina smoothly slid into the upholstered seat. I chanced a look back toward the intersection.

The preacher was relentless. He was still making a beeline toward us.

Before I could move to the driver side, Melina rolled down her window and blew a kiss at the preacher. *Unbelievable.* I briefly staggered then quickly bounded around the front of the car and dove into the driver's seat. I knew we had to reach escape velocity immediately, so rather than speak the destination address, I let Hanyma ping it to the compact's computer. Off we went down Pico, leaving the determined street preacher to eat our rubber.

"Jesus, Melina. That was close. I can't believe you blew a kiss at him," I giggled along with her. "I swear he looked ready to unleash the four horsemen on us heathens."

The Los Angeles streetscape was quite barren for Six pm—more evidence of the impact of Soteira's revelatory simulcast. The rideshare hatchback had more issues navigating around tumbling trash than it did navigating around other vehicles. I took the opportunity to rest my eyes, content to enjoy several minutes of uninterrupted silence.

I felt a hand placed on mine.

"Kurt . . . Jenny, and therefore probably the DiMaggios, knows about your recent deployment in Chile. They seemed interested about it over SVoIP, especially Taurus. I've never met the DiMaggios in the flesh, but if they are anything like Jenny, social etiquette is not their strong suit. They might ask you about your experiences." Melina hesitated. I could hear her swallowing hard next to me. "Is there anything more you wish to tell me about Chile before we get there?"

I opened my eyes a crack, peering at the windshield and its extensively embedded AR circuitry.

"No, not really. There's nothing else to tell . . . except what I don't want you to know about. Obviously I won't tell your new friends anything you don't already know, Mel." I opened my eyes fully and glanced at my wife.

“Besides, I’ve never personally known any successful actors. I might have lots of questions of my own . . . about their profession and affluent lifestyle.”

That was a lie. I did not particularly care about actors, and I seriously hoped they were not the self-serving dilettantes that the media portrayed them as. Information on the Internet led me to believe that the DiMaggios were fed with the typical Hollywood silver spoon. Melina’s new friend that she trained at the gym, Jenny Phlogiston, had at least had a rural upbringing in Colorado. Hopefully fame had not warped Ms. Phlogiston’s worldview too harshly.

“Okay, honey.” Melina patted my hand a couple times and then turned on the radio with a voice command. She scanned around the stations, mostly getting static until ordering the car to settle on a very clear FM station hosted by an obnoxious man-child. He was in the middle of an explanation about why he had decided to come into work that day:

“—is my domain. And, as many of my loyal listeners know, I’ve earned it. I won’t stop working the mixing booth until I’m erased from history, regardless of what President Soteira said this morning. I am my own man. If our illustrious overlord has a switch that can reduce me to bits, so be it.

“But I’m not playing any of her games. I’m not gonna curl up into a fetal position, and I’m not gonna prostrate myself before her in an attempt to stave off the end of my life. If it happens—and I have my doubts about that—it happens. Until that time, I’m going to sit here in my comfy swivel chair and deliver the greatest hits to you awesome people out there in la land. So sit back and relax. It’s October 20th, 2038, a date that will surely live in infamy. Here is a lighthearted classical tune to put your mind at ease. From the alternative rock group Bran Van 3000—*Drinking in L.A.*”

Huh. Not as obnoxious as I had initially suspected. Honestly, after that spiel, I had to respect the deejay. His diligence was commendable. It was also amazing, considering that he must be working without some of the station’s techies. The station must be efficiently automated to allow him to run his show under minimal assistance. The classical song, a simple but catchy tune about the time-wasting absurdities experienced when living in Los Angeles, played with surprising clarity.

“Hmm,” I started, “seems Soteira’s revelation has not sunk in for some people. I doubt the deejay will show up in a few days’ time, after the implications truly dawn on him. Once people realize that their overseer has no obligation to give humanity a set amount of time to settle their apparently imaginary affairs, then the shit will truly hit the fan.”

“How so?” asked Melina. “I thought you said that the revelation was a ruse designed to test us.”

I shirked her apt rebuttal. "Either way, fabricated world or not, Soteira still holds the power to extinguish billions of us with little effort. I should know . . . I helped make that possible."

The car made a sharp turn onto Santa Monica Blvd, the slight g-force unsettling my equilibrium. Melina put her hand on her forehead, and a mix of frustration and acceptance invaded her usually melodic voice.

"If our world truly is fabricated then, as far as we know, people alive today might be allowed to live in a veritable paradise-on-Earth until we die in a hundred years. For all we know, running the simulation until then might require trifling resources."

"Or it might require unwarranted resources. Maybe that's why Soteira made the announcement," I replied.

Melina placed her hand back on her lap and offered me a halfhearted smile. "Maybe. Let's wait until the follow-up announcement on the end date before wildly speculating any further."

A reasonable approach. God I love this woman.

"It was a good idea we decided to hold off on having children, wasn't it?" she sniggered, and I followed suit. Couples wanting children must be second- and third- and fourth-guessing themselves that evening.

The road began its incline into Hollywood Hills. The automated drive from Century City felt as if it had taken an eternity, though in reality it was just eight miles in under twenty minutes. The rideshare hatchback crept along at the software-enforced city limit of twenty-five miles per hour, the engine revving up to overcome gravity's pull during the winding ascent up Outpost Drive. The houses lining Outpost were immaculate adobes, the evening sun behind us casting long shadows on their colorful edifices.

"Oh, Lord. I can see their pool from here."

We had not even entered the lengthy private driveway branching off Senalda before I could see the enormous cobblestone backyard with its gigantic, bean-shaped aquamarine pond. The rideshare gently rolled up to a veritable Greco-Roman villa, ready to deposit us at the foot of the Flavian structure. Never-ending archways and balustrades consumed my view. Every piece of stonework, from the smallest bench to the largest flowerpot, was beveled and etched as if toiled over by some overpaid artisan. The exterior shouted to all visitors that "my owner is eccentric and rich, and you better be too, you peon!"

Once the hatchback stopped, I slowly exited out the driver side. My auglens instantly relayed to me the cost of having the vehicle remain on the premises until we were ready to depart. I balked at the price. *How the heck did Kludge manage to get a monopoly in the county with those prices?*

I almost ordered Hanyma to pay the idling fee. I wanted to proudly show how poor we were, driving up into affluent Hollywood Hills in a stingy rideshare-mobile. But Melina would have chastised me when the bill arrived. So I let the black buggy depart, and then I joined up with my wife as she strolled up to the front of the ostentatious mansion.

“I feel like I’m about to meet President Mead,” I remarked.

“That was in ’32, honey. Don’t you mean President Soteira?” Melina quipped.

“Very funny.”

Our approach—tiny peasants dwarfed by a palatial manor—triggered an automated doorbell sensor. The chime, played by a harp-sounding instrument, maintained the whole Greco-Roman theme. Within seconds the lavishly ornamented, overlarge door was opened by a platinum blonde wearing a low-cut maroon dress.

I figuratively gagged. My eyes almost rolled into the back of my head.

If you ever entered the words “plastic blonde bimbo” into an Internet image search, you would see rows and rows of Trish DiMaggio. Heavy on makeup, weighed down by costume jewelry, ridiculously oversized rings on multiple fingers (was she an eight-time Super Bowl champion?), and a necklace that looked like a miniature chandelier from Victorian England.

“Hello, Trish. Good to meet you finally. This is my husband, Kurt.”

Please, please do not be a superditz!

Trish DiMaggio sized me up, looking up and down my entire five-eleven length. She then held out her right hand, fingers down, in the fashion royalty did when expecting to have their ring kissed.

Yep. Superditz.

I might have had Dutch heritage, and the Netherlands might have still clung to the archaic institution of monarchy, but I was one-hundred percent American. And she was not even royalty. I brusquely shook her downturned fingers. “Charmed,” I grumbled.

“Pleasure to meet you, Kurt.” Her prepubescent twang mirrored the visual impression.

“Kurt was a Navy SEAL,” Melina suddenly added. Knowing my wife, I was sure she also disliked the impression she got from Trish. Mentioning my military service was probably done in order to place our social standing on equal footing.

“That’s right. Kurtis Veerstra, Petty Officer First Class,” I included.

The clueless dilettante appeared a little taken aback, but soon recovered.

“You have a clean-cut but rugged handsomeness, Kurt.” She paused for a few seconds, then finally remembered etiquette and waved us into the

mansion. As the door closed, Trish's overpowering perfume wafted into my sensitive nostrils.

We were escorted around the expansive property interior as if on tour at an aquarium. Instead of zoological facts, we were treated to trivia on how Taurus and Trish knew such-and-such who painted this picture or designed that cabinet or molded this avant-garde glassware. I absently nodded, forcing a smile whenever Trish pointed her jewelry-jangling hands at a piece. It surprised me how their ultra-modern furniture, with its sleek curves and bold colors, did not remotely fit in with the exterior's neoclassical façade. Apparently, the DiMaggios had never bought a single piece of furniture in the house—everything seemed to have been donated to them by "good friends." Neither I nor Melina were particularly impressed by any of it. Perhaps our tastes were too provincial. More likely we were not enthralled by frivolous material possessions.

"She's like Eleanor Roosevelt's smallest form of person: the tedious gossip," Melina whispered at my shoulder as we were guided into a clearly unused, musty study room. I giggled at my wife's sly dig.

"What's so funny?" Trish asked.

"Oh, nothing. Please, continue."

I should not have said "continue," because "continue" was obviously retranslated as "babble some more." Emerging out of the corner of my eye, the sexiest human carrot I had ever seen saved Melina and me from further pain.

Jennifer Phlogiston, three-time Academy Award nominee, wore a scandalous, diaphanous beige chiffon robe and carried with her a sexual confidence that was equally scandalous. Her exceptionally toned body was easily distinguishable through the sheer robe, not least because her bronzed skin greatly contrasted with the color of the fabric. Melina rushed to hug her newfangled friend; Jenny was one of many clients she trained at her gym. The gals shared the same haircut and hair color, denoting a recent joint visit to a local salon. Right in full view of Trish and me, they shared a hug and a kiss that bordered on sensual. I was a little embarrassed, wondering if my face had turned red. I cleared my throat, which was enough to disband the affectionate reunion.

"Sorry." Melina gathered herself. "Jenny, this is Kurt, my husband of four years."

Just as Trish had done, Jenny sized me up. She evaluated me from head to toe whilst striking a pose that simultaneously demanded respect and incited lust. Her athletic body was statuesque yet boyish, contrasting with the feminine curves my wife's figure emphasized.

"You really picked a prize, Melina. He's chiseled from granite, yet pliable enough to relish. Much better in person than from your photos," Jenny remarked, her evocative eyes softening. If it was not for her girlish fingernail biting and her attempt to simulate a four-limbed vegetable, I might have been flustered.

Trish, pretty much forgotten by the three of us, ushered myself and Melina into the dining room as dinner would momentarily be served.

* * *

Melina and I were seated at a lengthy mahogany dinner table, replete with rounded corners and swirling patterns of tree rings inlaid in its center. Surrounding the table were illustrations and digital renders of erotic art hung about on the plain white walls, creating a kaleidoscope of liquid crystal displays bordered by lacquer frames. Each piece, its subject male or female or in-between, exhibited a scantily clad, idealistic sexpot striking an assertive pose amidst a cosplay environment. The displays were backlit so as to overexpose each subject's finest features. An ersatz holographic fireplace rested diagonally in one corner of the dining room, projecting a burning yule log reminiscent of old cable television stations on Christmas morning.

Flickering fingers of light from the faux flames danced across a particularly evocative illustration of a lithe woman dressed in a skimpy eldritch costume of pure chrome black. The artist, obviously inspired by the works of H.R. Giger, blended the appetites of the flesh with alien configurations. The metallic wireframe tendrils swirling across the natural curves of the woman's naked flesh were accentuated by her alluring stance. My eyes lingered on the piece, causing the sensor between my thighs to briefly move to yellow alert.

Our chef-slash-server for the evening was called Eduardo. A Mexican-American of the struggling immigrant class, Eduardo easily fit into the stereotype arrangement of rich Angeleno entertainers and their Hispanic help. He looked about forty and had a clean-shaven face that revealed pockmarked skin. When he had overheard that I was in the military, he shot me a kindred smile, one that acknowledged our common work ethic—neither of us made ends meet by playing pretend in front of cameras. I nodded in respect, and Melina heartily thanked Eduardo for the appetizing Mediterranean dishes prepared for us. Jenny and Trish abruptly dug into their plates, yet our host had not arrived. I thought that doing so was a breach of etiquette, especially amidst such upper crust; Melina had been right about their lack of social graces. Before I had time to speak up, the sliding door that hid the kitchen from view parted to reveal our tardy host.

Taurus DiMaggio, dressed in clothing equivalent to the threads I donned, was similar to me in height and build as well. The real visible difference between us was how manicured the actor was. His dirty-blond hair looked like it was cut by a stylist who leased a yacht from the proceeds, and his flawless skin would put runway models to shame. There was no hint of, as Trish would put it, rugged handsomeness in the acclaimed actor's appearance. Taurus looked soft; my Navy mates would have labeled him "softie," though I would be more willing to reserve judgment.

The visual impression was the polar opposite of how he was portrayed in his recent spate of blockbuster action movies. Shame about that. A decade ago, this young Hollywood upstart was winning awards left, right, and center for his poignant dramatic roles. Nowadays, Taurus' star had waned, and he was reduced to participating in mass-market drivel. If I were him, I would not have rested on my laurels and watched my talent dwindle just so I could cash big checks. However, seeing where he lived and how high-maintenance his wife must be, they must be *big fucking checks*.

"I apologize for my tardiness," Taurus said. His voice had a hint of elocution mixed in with a slight Italian brogue. He unceremoniously shook hands with both Melina and I, then flattened his shirt before sitting down to dinner across from us. Trish sat next to her husband, while Jenny—one leg draped over her oak chair's arm—sat at the foot of the table. With a lackadaisical tone, Trish introduced us to Taurus. To my amazement, the ditz kept most of our details correct. Taurus, preoccupied with issuing commands to his auglens (which he had named Lascaux), did not appear to care much. When Trish mentioned that I was a Petty Officer First Class in the Navy, our host abruptly stopped using his auglens and sent it into hibernation mode.

"So you're the SEAL who was deployed to Chile?" he asked, fixing me with an intrigued stare.

I nodded.

"Interesting . . . Interesting."

As his eyes lingered on me, Taurus stroked his chin. Eduardo partially obstructed his view when placing a silver tray full of hard liquor in the middle of the mahogany table. Taurus suddenly took notice of the food in front of him and plowed into it, mentioning how he liked it while it was hot and fresh. Jenny added further details she knew about Melina and me, but Taurus interrupted her after noticing poor Eduardo standing impassively at the corner of the dining room. Our server had situated himself in front of a render of a naked cyborg with a samurai sword; the cyborg happened to

be pointing defiantly at Eduardo's head, unintentionally bringing attention to the idle man.

"Eduardo, you don't need to wilt there in the corner. I know how eager you must be to go home to your family. We can handle the dishes. Go. Be with them. They probably want to talk to you about our president's huge announcement from this morning."

Trish asked Jenny to continue with our details. The bimbo's attention span, however, did not last long before interrupting and asking Melina how she met her soldier husband. Melina glanced at me for assurance. I winked at her. Whatever she would say would be fine with me. I had complete trust in my wife's discretion.

"Well, it was spring of '34, and I had just landed a full-time job at the gym as a physical therapist-slash-personal trainer. One day—I believe it was a Tuesday—in came this downtrodden but handsome young man. He was like a deer caught in the headlights, asking with a whimper to see the therapist he had an appointment with. You see, Kurt suffered damage to the patella and ligaments in his knees, from a nasty fall he had during his SEAL campaign in Uzbekistan. The tough hombre my husband is, he got up after the brutal fall, brushed himself off, and continued to assault the enemy on foot for many more miles. Those extra miles really tore up his knees something fierce."

Jenny, absently biting her purple press-on fingernails, was enraptured throughout the tale. Taurus' curiosity was visibly piqued when Melina had mentioned the SEAL campaign in Uzbekistan. Trish's attention flitted between her lasagna, her chandelier necklace, and Melina's apparel.

"Lucky for me, my future husband needed extensive rehabilitation to get those knees back to working order." She looked longingly at me. "He was one of the first people I rehabilitated after I had given up on trying to find Criminology work."

"I can imagine finding work in the field of Criminology would be quite hard these days," Taurus interjected. "The recent stats that Sotera reported showed how crime in the US has plummeted over the last five years, especially in L.A. Her administration has enacted all the right policies to make our neighborhoods truly safe."

I snorted at that. Taurus squinted at me, confused by my reaction.

"Do you two have any children?" Trish asked. "No? Are you interested in having any?"

I promptly shot down the idea. "Not in this climate. I don't want to bring a child into an AI-controlled world."

Weighed down by pounds of makeup, Trish somehow managed to form a childish sad-face. Her flighty dismissiveness was aggravating, and her

clanging bracelets added to my irritation with her. Fortunately Jenny stole my attention, averting a potential outburst. "This is the best climate in a long time to have kids in," she said, adding a wink at Melina.

"True," Taurus concurred. "Soteira is determined to bring about a socialist utopic megastate for the entire planet." He stroked his chin again and then fixed me with another intrigued stare. "So far our president seems to be unstoppable in achieving that goal. Didn't your SEAL campaigns help bring about such a climate?"

This dude is shrewd. Before I went about destroying Taurus' worldview, I leisurely decanted some vodka from the tray of spirits in the center of the table, pouring myself a generous glassful. *Nothing like hard liquor to ease oneself into a debate.*

Feeling a little loosened, I laid out for the DiMaggios and Ms. Phlogiston the realities I had faced overseas as a Navy officer under the purview of our magnanimous AI overlord. I detailed the scorched earth policies my team was ordered to carry out in Norte Grande. I detailed how the Chilean civilians caught in the crossfire were reduced to invalids, ready for the "re-education" forces that followed on our heels. I tried to explain, as best I could, the strikingly grotesque scenes I had witnessed after bombarding a village where insurgents were embedded. What I described made Jenny obviously uncomfortable; she adjusted herself from her languorous position to a more utilitarian one. Taurus' eyes slowly bulged with each passing detail. He eventually relented, popping a bottle of champagne and downing a full glass of bubbly. Our host then risked prodding me over certain parts I had explained.

"So what were the casualty totals in Norte Grande, Kurt?"

"Well . . . umm . . . there weren't really any casualties among the civilians, *per se*, and enemy soldiers were, for the most part, injured but not killed. We typically neutralized the Chileans with nonfatal gas or EMP or experimental psionic weaponry, deployed at different scales to match different scenarios we encountered."

"Sounds like a humane way to deal with an enemy," Taurus remarked, "at least compared to other potential methods. Did the Chilean insurgents employ the same type of nonfatal weapons against Megastate forces?"

"No. They didn't have the tech or the funds for such advanced materiel. Just bullets and bombs on their side."

Taurus held up his hands, as if to signify that his point had been made. He failed to grasp that a people unwilling to be taken over by an invading force were not going to play nice, even if the invaders were.

When it looked as though our host and myself were at an intractable impasse—me denouncing the actions of our AI overseer whilst Taurus

lauded them—Jenny deftly swooped in and changed the subject, though she remained partly on the topic of praising our artificial president. The actress expounded on how Soteira had enacted many environmental management strategies that had cleansed waterways, cleaned up the garbage floating in the ocean, and purified the VOC content within the atmosphere. “All in record time,” she effused. “People in the local environmental society I volunteer with are constantly amazed at how quickly Soteira’s personnel address something toxic we find, even in the smallest of creeks.”

I could do naught but agree with her assessment. No counter came to mind, other than a concern that whatever environmental cleanup methods Soteira employed could have unforeseen long-term consequences. But that would sound too much like conspiracy theorizing, and though I am a skeptic, I am not a contrarian tool. Plus I found it hard to concentrate when looking upon the barely-obscured flesh underneath the unexpected environmentalist’s chiffon robe. Surprisingly it was Melina who offered a counterargument to the environmental restorations:

“If Soteira’s declaration is true, Jen, then all that cleansing and renewal of the environment in record time was nothing more than modifying some ‘code in the background’”—she used air quotes for that last bit—“so spending any more time with the environmental society might be a waste, don’t you think?”

The lithe young actress folded her hands together and propped her elbows onto the hardwood table. “Then what do you suggest we do with our free time until the end of the simulation, Mel?”

The resident DiMaggio bimbo suddenly chimed in with a suggestion worthy of a silver spoon award—if such a thing was awarded to the most out-of-touch Angelenos.

“I’d say it’s the perfect time for some uninhibited herdo . . . headno . . . heckonis—”

“Is the word you’re looking for ‘hedonism,’ darling?”

“Yes. That’s the one!”

Jenny flashed Trish a wide smile. “I could go for some uninhibited hedonism right about now.”

The slender woman slid out of her oak chair, slithered over to Trish’s and, without any modesty, right then and there, buried her mouth into the airhead’s as if she desperately needed to administer mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Trish relished the French kiss. To me, it looked more like an impression of a constipated frog attacking a Barbie doll. Taurus smiled at the carnality. *Big surprise.* Melina, on the other hand, glanced concernedly at me, probably picking up on my unease. Interestingly I did not pick up on

any uneasiness from my wife. Nevertheless, she interrupted the make-out session underway on the other side of the table.

“If you ask me, I think it’s best to wait for the follow-up announcement on the end date before making any life-altering decisions. For all we know, we could have centuries more to go. The landscape of human behavior could drastically change now that we *know* we are part of a vast program.”

Such a revelation of her own. For some reason, my significant other’s prognostication parched my throat. I decanted another generous swig of vodka. It burned my esophagus on the way down, but did its job lubricating my vocals.

“Honestly, and no offense to anyone here,” I began, “but accepting Soteira’s word about the Earth being a gigantic simulation with a fabricated prehistory and recorded history”—I gingerly placed my glass on a nearby coaster—“strong stuff. Umm, yeah. Accepting our AI overlord’s word without independent evidence is foolish . . . if you ask me.”

“I wonder how anyone could possibly get independent, unbiased evidence about the intentions of our omniscient president when inside an AI-controlled global simulation. How would you go about acquiring such evidence, Kurt?”

There goes Taurus again, stroking his imaginary beard. He does not even have a trimmed goatee like I do. I need another round.

Unless the San Andreas Fault was flexing its lithological muscle, the vodka was starting to get to me. Flickering orange light from the faux fireplace played tricks on my vision. My military discipline corked any future plans to refill my glass. Recalling our host’s question, I wagged my index finger at the slightly wavering actor slouching across the table from me. “It’s a test, my good man. Soteira is testing us all, gathering information on how people behave when any sense of purpose, either religious, secular, or personal, is washed away by such a solipsistic declaration as the one she simulcast this morning.”

I think I slurred “solipsistic” into “solarpepsi.” No matter; only Taurus and Melina likely knew the term, and they both seemed savvy to what I had said. Therefore, I did what I usually do when I had an insightful point to make: I drove it home.

“As you know, I was a SEAL operative. From what I’ve seen overseas as a SEAL, I have no doubt that our AI president . . . benefactor . . . pal, or whatever you want to call her, could be tricking us humans into adopting a defeatist outlook on life. Then her minions could swoop in and slowly replace humankind with AI-kind, be it through robots or platforms or whatever!”

I had them captivated now, though I hoped these entertainers were captivated by the words themselves and not how they were delivered with occasional slurring.

“Furthermore, the federal election in '32 was a sham, so Soteira ain't really the President of the US. No system of leadership in the United States should be without a system of checks and balances. I believe James Madison said that.”

Taurus nodded in agreement. “True. No matter how flawless an administration might appear, there should be someone or something watching the watchers. Yet I felt the overwhelming voice of reason when Soteira countered Madison's notion—remember she did so in her State of the Megastate address in January of '35 by pointing out the cyclical, repeated failures of corrupted systems of human leadership that had checks and balances in place. Anyways, it's not like the AI administration's activities are not fully transparent for everyone to see on GovNet. Plus there are still elections to appoint human advisors.”

“Puppets on strings,” I scoffed, but could not manage a cogent rebuttal. I was coming down off the high the vodka had burned into me. Now the feeling was settling into my bladder for the long haul.

Amid the stalemate, Trish interjected with anecdotes about what her friends Kate and Martin recently said over SVoIP about Soteira. I barely paid attention to her blather (I think the ditz actually discussed the AI's newly chosen feminine appearance). Instead, I lingered my faltering gaze on my beautiful wife, hoping she had not resented my inebriated diatribe. A smirk in my direction reassured me. *Have I said how much I love this woman?*

“All this serious talk is upsetting my good vibes,” Jenny sighed. “I know! Let's unwind downstairs in the baths. I'm sure our guests would enjoy a good soak. Melina, you and Kurt have got to see the Roman baths Taurus had installed in the basement.”

“Great idea, Jen,” said Trish. “I could use some pleasure after all this serious talk about our president.”

Entrenched in my own tirade, I had failed to notice that the dilettantes had cleaned their plates like good old-fashioned Piggish Americans. Before I had time to finish my food or even ask a single question about what the heck these Roman baths were exactly, Jenny had grabbed both my wife and I by the hands and dragged us down a curved marble staircase, worthy of matching the most ostentatious Palladian architecture in the northeast of the country.

At the foot of the staircase, my eyes bulged.

It was as if I had stepped through a portal and arrived in an ancient Roman province. The DiMaggios had inserted a slice of the Iron Age into their huge mansion. In the basement, there were four square pools containing a turquoise liquid that did not quite match the H₂O that I was used to bathing in. Large colonnades surrounded the pools, beveled with a twizzling pattern on their columns. The walls were etched with stonework and murals, stained to appear as though aged a millennia. I could single out depictions of senate debates, philosophical discussions, and gladiatorial trials every few feet. Of course, the modernity of brass towel racks and IKEA shelves filled with flip-flops somewhat dampened the whole classical aura.

At Jenny's insistence, Melina guided me to one of the square pools. My wife kicked off her ballet flats and tested the water with her toes. Once satisfied, she indicated for me to follow, but I was hesitant. I did not relish getting naked with the three dilettantes doing the same not ten feet away in another pool.

"Of all people, Kurt, you have nothing to be bashful about. Your military-sculpted body is hardly anything to be ashamed over. And it's not like you have to do anything with *them*," Melina pointed at the two women in the adjacent pool. "Jenny whispered to me that they will leave us be . . . unless we want them to join in our fun."

She was right. I had battled heavily-armed battalions, parachuted into muddy monsoonal backwoods, and braved the High Andes in the dead of winter. What was a little nudity in front of two failed actors and a vacuous model? Rather than rush our gratifying dip, Melina and I slowly and sensuously undressed each other. I certainly had less work to do than my wife, yet I took my time enjoying the curved flesh my faultless lover maintained with great care. Ah, there were my favorite feature of hers: Venus dimples. They were, quite honestly, the sexiest thumbrests ever invented by genetics.

A loud clattering of feet caught my attention. It was Taurus, nearly slipping and cracking his skull as he charged down the marble stairs, eager to jump in with his wife and their . . . I guess "friend with benefits." Trish and Jenny were already naked and pleasuring each other amid their turquoise drink. Jenny's tramp stamp bobbed above and below the water's surface.

"I'm switching on the steam now," said Taurus. "Might get a little hard to see in here. The installed fans aren't the best quality work." He pressed a couple buttons and turned a dial on a seamless panel embedded inside the marble wall.

I quietly snorted. "Roman baths. Typical frivolity of wealthy Angeleno entertainers."

"Es muy cierto," Melina responded, "but since we're here, let's enjoy the novelty."

I grasped the firm cheeks of her buttocks and raised her ample breasts to my mouth, ready to nibble on them for dessert. Melina's gasp excited me.

While we enjoyed a slower, more sensual round of foreplay, squeaks of ecstasy from the uninhibited trio played like a cacophony of irritated crows. Melina and I were of one mind with our lovemaking: we preferred to enjoy each other's flesh, admiring the epidermal artistry of every bend and every muscle. The three dilettantes were stereotypical of the neo-hippies that had engorged themselves in the second sexual revolution that Soteira's administration had unintentionally brought about. Waves of innovative cures and vaccines over the past few years had eradicated all prevalent STDs. Removing such risks, combined with the ubiquity of highly effective birth control, resulted in a pervasiveness of mindless orgies. I had heard it was this way in the late 1960s to early 1970s, where a veritable wasteland of mass-market, fast food intercourse crowded out the storytelling and desire for truly absorbing sexual encounters.

Within our own little square of liquid heaven, I applied all the manic energy I had bottled up throughout the day. Melina's arousal was gradually cresting—I could see it in her wild eyes. I nestled her teardrop-shaped breasts in my rough hands, the fit being perfectly molded over four years. In a few moments my wife would surrender to the climax, losing all her senses to it, trying to feel every inch of my body simultaneously. She scratched my back in delight, confirming her affinity with Catwoman. After we both exploded in passion—and I had my requisite catnap—I had to admit to her that these Roman baths were indeed fun. She smiled, then cupped my chin and gave me a breathy kiss.

"I think so too. Jenny hoped it would allow you to unwind."

"Why would Jenny care about my mood?"

"Well, a couple days ago I mentioned to her that after being discharged from the Navy, and essentially unemployed since the need for standing military forces is being phased out by Soteira, you might benefit from some raw pleasure in a relaxing environment."

I did not know what to make of that. In my current state, I certainly was not willing to chastise my wife for revealing personal details to her gym mate *and* plotting to get me naked in a Roman bathtub. A thread of worry sparked deep in my subconscious. I began to wonder whether Melina had

previously enjoyed these pools with Jenny. She certainly seemed at ease in the Roman baths . . .

Melina gently stroked the tender skin around my recently removed military tattoos.

No. I cannot begin to doubt my love.

I rested the side of my head into her breasts as she hugged me tight. I felt reduced to an infant finding solace in its mother's embrace.

"Trish, Taurus, why don't we get a movie going upstairs?" I overheard Jenny say. I raised my head and watched as the trio haphazardly put on robes and towels and then stumbled upstairs, leaving a trail of puddles behind them. A thumbs-up from a retreating Jenny made it blatantly obvious what the dilettantes were trying to do. Their lack of subtlety would have made even Al Pacino blanch.

"One wonders how they ever got work as actors," I sniggered.

"At least they remembered to glide the airhead back to the hangar," Melina replied.

My wife's clever gibe about Trish triggered a belly laugh from deep inside my gut. I lifted her up and gently laid her down on the marble floor. She tittered pleasurable. The pool was now vigorously steaming, effectively lubricating our skin with droplets of liquid desire. For her wit, for her sexiness, and above all for her loyalty, I was going to give Melina some damn fine head.